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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 PHNOM PENH 000577

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [SNAR](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [SENV](#) [CB](#)

SUBJECT: CAMBODIA DRUG TRENDS: INCREASED SEIZURES REFLECT
INCREASED TRAFFICKING

REF: A. PHNOM PENH 515

[1](#)B. PHNOM PENH 536

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. Even before the April 1, 2007 raid on a methamphetamine superlab (reftels), significant increases in drug seizures in Cambodia in 2006 pointed to a strong increase in drug trafficking and modest improvements in police effectiveness. Increased trafficking by ethnic Chinese and an increase in concealed drug trafficking to Australia contributed to a near-doubling of heroin seizures in 2006. Prices for methamphetamine pills have risen in Cambodia while the amount of seizures increased by 12% over [1](#)2005. While international observers point to some modest improvements in Cambodia's law enforcement efforts, and give particularly high marks to the Anti-Drug Police Chief, large scale arrests and seizures -- such as the methamphetamine lab raid -- remain the exception rather than the rule and suggest that, most of the time, the big fish continue to operate undetected. End Summary.

More Drugs Lead to More Busts

[1](#)2. (SBU) Increases in drug seizures by Cambodian law enforcement authorities likely reflect increased drug trafficking into Cambodia and modest improvements in police effectiveness. According to a recently released translation of statistics from the National Authority for Combating Drugs, heroin seizures more than doubled from 8.8 kg in 2005 to 19.5 kg in 2006. Cocaine seizures rose five-fold (albeit from a small base) from 1 kg in 2005 to 5.1 kg in 2006. Seizures of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) tablets rose by 12%, reaching 428,553 tablets in 2006. While Anti-Drug Police Chief Moek Dara trumpeted the rise in seizures as evidence of his unit's effectiveness, the Prime Minister expressed skepticism about police efforts at a Minister of the Interior conference in February. Australian Federal Police (AFP) liaison Kim Stewart told Poleconoff that increased seizures are probably due more to increased flows of drugs than dramatic improvements in law enforcement efficiency.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Foreign law enforcement officials and international observers describe the Cambodian Anti-Drug Police (CADP) as eager to follow up on tips -- coming from either foreign sources such as the DEA or Australian Federal Police or local informants -- but with little ability to generate their own leads on major cases. Stewart noted that Moek Dara is "a bit of a go-getter" and seems genuinely motivated to increase the

effectiveness of the CADP. Nonetheless, the AFP has seen no dramatic improvements in policing or investigative methods over the past year. She noted that bureaucracy within the CADP has not improved in the two and a half years that she has been in Cambodia, and that all decisions must be made at senior levels, creating bottlenecks. Moreover, she said that a "blame mentality" hindered effective police work, as there was no protection for well-intentioned officers who make mistakes, such as officers who legitimately suspect a traveler of concealing drugs but find nothing upon further examination. DEA Bangkok Country Office staff described the CADP as extremely cooperative in following up on DEA leads, such as the case of South American drug smugglers in September and October 2006, but said they hoped the CADP would be more timely in notifying them of future cases.

14. (SBU) Operational budget difficulties may be one of several obstacles -- including lack of training, low salaries, corruption, and limited political will -- hampering the effectiveness of the CADP. Moek Dara complained that the National Authority for Combating Drugs (NACD), a policy-making body which oversees the CADP and other organizations, fails to pass on donor money to his police unit. He noted that although he has 232 police officers in Phnom Penh and 434 in the rest of the country, his operating budget for travel, raids, sting operations, etc. was just USD 2,500/month.

Heroin Seizures Up Dramatically; Linked to China, Taiwan and Australia

15. (SBU) Dramatic increases in heroin seizures and arrests seem to be driven by several new trends: increased use of

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bodily concealment as a trafficking method, an increase in ethnic Chinese trafficking heroin through Cambodia into Taiwan and mainland China, and increased concealment-based drug smuggling from southeast Asia to Australia. Of the 18 individuals arrested in 2006 for heroin trafficking, at least 8 were ethnic Chinese, all of whom were arrested at Phnom Penh International Airport and who collectively carried 12.4 kg of heroin. Jeremy Douglas of the UN Office of Drugs and Crime in Bangkok speculated that the increase in injecting drug use in Taiwan may be driving part of this trend. Several of these would-be Chinese traffickers were discovered because they had strapped heroin packets to their bodies or shoes, giving them an odd appearance or creating difficulties in walking. Others attempted to conceal heroin in their luggage, including a Taiwanese man smuggling heroin disguised as foil-wrapped candies.

16. (SBU) Stewart noted that there have been dramatic increases in cases of travelers concealing drugs and traveling via air, including into Australia. In March 2006, a Vietnamese-Australian was arrested for smuggling heroin in fish fillets on a flight from Cambodia. In October 2006, nine Cambodian couriers were arrested during the attempted smuggling of more than 4 kg of heroin to Australia. Stewart mentioned cases of Australia-bound concealed heroin originating from Ho Chi Minh City as well.

Amphetamine Prices Rise; Traffickers Use New Methods

17. (SBU) Prices for amphetamine-type stimulants have been rising over the past few years, according to Moek Dara. He said that in 2005 a single ATS tablet was worth fifty US cents in Champasat, Laos; one US dollar in northern Cambodia or in Phnom Penh; and two dollars in the western Cambodian provinces bordering Thailand. (Note: Drug prices in Cambodia are generally lower where the drugs enter the country at the Lao border and rise as the drugs get closer to Thailand, where a single ATS tablet can fetch USD 7, and Vietnam, where an ATS tablet can fetch USD 4.50. End Note.)

Over the course of the year, however, he said that while the price remained constant in Laos, the price of an ATS tablet rose to USD 1.50 in northern Cambodia, USD 3 in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, and more than USD 4 in western Cambodia. The rising price of ATS tablets means higher profits for drug traffickers who successfully complete their trips: Moek Dara estimated that profit for the route between the Lao border and Phnom Penh had tripled.

18. (SBU) Moek Dara attributed the increasing cost of ATS tablets to his increased law enforcement efforts, though World Health Organization drug expert Graham Shaw noted that the price of heroin has been rising in the region over the past six years, making methamphetamines a more attractive alternative and raising the amount that people are willing to pay for them. Shaw noted that the rising prices of both drugs are causing a resurgence of solvent abuse -- a concern among the health community as "huffing" causes health damage, particularly neurological damage, that is more serious and develops more quickly than negative health impacts of other types of drug abuse.

19. (SBU) Another change in amphetamine trafficking patterns, Moek Dara noted, was that drug traffickers are now shipping in smaller numbers of high-potency ATS tablets and then reprocessing the drugs in Cambodia to create lower potency pills. For the traffickers, this is a risk-aversion strategy, as importing more highly concentrated ATS and then "cutting" them with legal substances allows the same number of pills to be produced while reducing the volume of illicit material that must enter Cambodia. Moek Dara reported raiding nine re-processing facilities, including six in Phnom Penh, and seizing enough raw materials in 2006 to produce three million tablets. Most of the facilities were run by Cambodians, although a few were Vietnamese-run, he said. He noted that there were still two or three re-processing facilities operating in Cambodia and said he hoped to raid them soon.

DEA Cooperation Critical to Cocaine Seizures at Airport

110. (SBU) Cooperation with the Drug Enforcement

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Administration (DEA) was the second only to "NACD effort" as the cause of the dramatic increase in cocaine seizures, according to NACD director Lour Ramin. He noted that all of this year's cocaine busts -- three seizures netting 5.1 kg, five times last year's total -- stemmed from DEA tips. This amount was seized in a series of busts of South Americans who had swallowed cocaine and entered Cambodia via the Phnom Penh International Airport. The DEA passed tips about these cases on to the Cambodian police, who apprehended the suspects and recovered the drugs. Moek Dara noted that the cocaine market in Cambodia is small and he suspected these drugs were bound for the larger Thai market. He asserted that after the opening of Bangkok's new Suvarnabhumi International Airport in September 2006, drug traffickers became alarmed by the capability of new screening equipment and chose to re-route their shipments. The new route is for people to enter Cambodia at Phnom Penh, fly to Siem Reap, expel the drugs, and then travel overland into Thailand. Lour Ramin also thanked the US for other US counternarcotics assistance, including INL-funded demand reduction and drug interdiction training and JIATF-West counternarcotics training.

Safrole Oil: An Emerging Threat

111. (SBU) Moek Dara described the trafficking of safrole oil, a precursor chemical, as a threat that had emerged since 2004. In the last year, he noted that the police had conducted 20 raids, arrested or "educated" (i.e., chastised) 521 people, and destroyed 100 steaming tanks. Several existing laws have small portions relevant to precursor

control, but the punishments are mainly fines, offering little deterrence. The CADP chief proudly noted that Interior Minister Sar Kheng had agreed to his suggestion to move safrole oil to a different class of restricted substances, offering stiffer penalties and creating a better deterrent to its harvest and trafficking. Safrole oil will now be included in a list of drug manufacturing materials, leading to a jail time of 2-5 years as well as fines.

Potential Drug Trafficking Routes and Methods

¶12. (SBU) Two drug trafficking methods are widely recognized as common by local drug experts: from southern Laos into northern Cambodia's Stung Treng and Preah Vihear provinces either overland or via the Mekong, and via air travelers in their luggage or concealed on or in their bodies. WHO drug expert Graham Shaw outlined other potential methods and routes for drug traffickers. Shaw noted that Cambodia's extreme northeast could be an attractive area for drug smuggling between Laos and Vietnam. There is essentially no law enforcement presence in extreme northeastern Cambodia outside of the provincial capital of Banlung, he noted, and very little is known publicly about the roads, air fields, and helipads in the region. Would-be smugglers could easily build new drug smuggling routes under the guise of building logging roads, and well-connected officials could even take advantage of periodic road closures associated with the presence of Montagnard refugees to traffic drugs without attracting attention.

¶13. (SBU) Shaw also noted that Cambodia's airports have many vulnerabilities beyond the small, foreign-based networks of couriers who have been arrested thus far. Standard security procedures in both airports are poor and center on security contractors rather than government officials. Military compounds located near Phnom Penh and Siem Reap airports and VIP waiting rooms that allow patrons to skip security procedures offer easy access with little scrutiny to government/military officials and the well-connected. Tarmac access is freely granted, and a feud between immigration officials and airport authorities affects the issuing of airport ID cards. Finally, Shaw expressed skepticism about the rehabilitation of the airport in Sihanoukville, saying he was surprised that the airport was re-opening when he perceived Sihanoukville's foreign tourist potential as limited, and wondering if there was a reason why the upgrading of the Sihanoukville airport was taking so long.

Comment

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¶14. (SBU) Cambodia's already significant drug trafficking problem is expanding. Although the Cambodian Anti-Drug Police, and particularly Moek Dara, seem to be attempting to match the rising threat, they remain a largely reactive force. While drug seizures rose substantially from 2005 to 2006, these seizures appeared to target relatively small scale couriers rather than the heads of major operations. Indeed, infrequent spectacular busts -- including the recent discovery of a methamphetamine superlab in Cambodia, the 2004 seizure of more than 800,000 ATS tablets, and the 2003 arrest of Major General Dom Hak and related seizure of more than 40 kg of methamphetamines -- suggest that there is large-scale drug trafficking (and now production) happening in Cambodia, the police just aren't catching most of it. End Comment.

MUSSOMELI